

Impressions



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Impressions

Shirley Jones '86

In the spring of 1983 I visited the United States for the first time. Travelling from New York to San Francisco and south even to Texas, I can't claim I know America, but I saw enough to be very excited by it all.

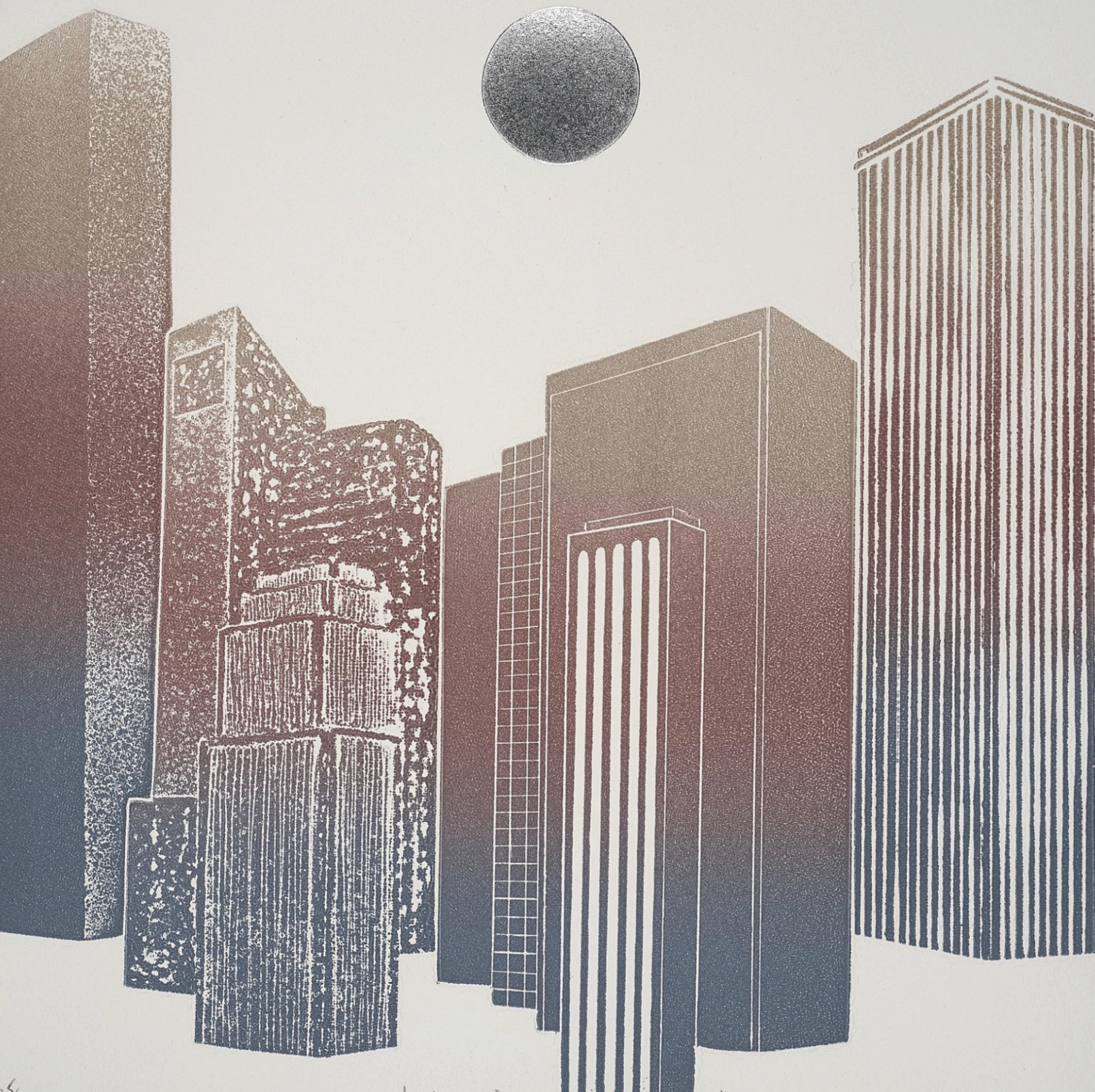
And when we returned to New York at the end of that exhilarating, disorientating trip I felt almost at home. During the few days there at the beginning of our visit I had established my own geography of the city, having walked it endlessly, insatiably and even, in parts of Broadway, rather naively. At last it was possible to set foot outside the hotel without that obligatory street map clutched in my hand!

As for Americans, I had been told I would find them friendly and kind, and I wasn't disappointed. They can also be unreserved to the point of vulnerability, and being Welsh I appreciate that. Best of all they warmed to my books and I basked in that warmth because I and my books are the same thing.

"So what do you think?" - of New York; San Francisco; Chicago - I was asked so often and so eagerly, and a platitude was so often all that time and the occasion allowed me as a reply.

But the places I saw and the people I met deserved more than such trite comments. Some weeks after returning home I sat down and began to write. And write. I could have gone on writing, but images crowded in that demanded visual expression. *Impressions* is the result.

New York

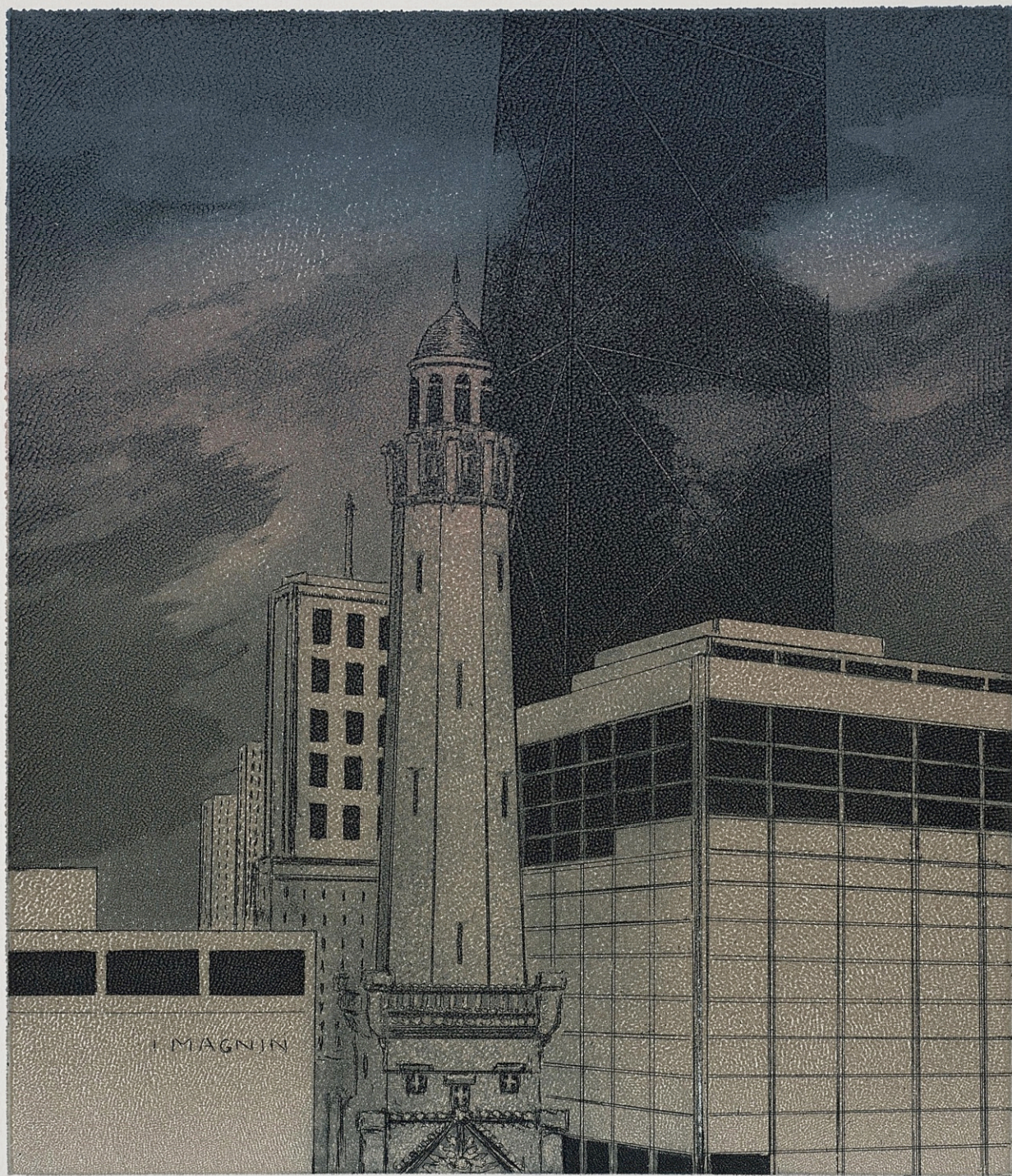


And as for me, New York was indeed a big apple
Green and crisp and fresh at my first bite.
Maybe the sweet savour of success
Heady as champagne
Sharpened my appetite for this city of success.

'Here but for the grace of God go you!'
Read the sign that the blind man wore
Standing before the doors of Sachs
On fashionable Fifth Avenue.
But tourists brushed past the beggar's dog,
Eager to see St Patrick's ornate spires -
A monument to Gothic splendour surely,
But not to poverty or failure.

I dropped some dollars in the blind man's tin
Wondering if compassion or guilt
Had prompted me - or some atavistic urge to barter:
Three coins for a charm to bring me back here.

Chicago



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Impressions - Chicago

Shirley Jones '82

Oh Chicago, I'd have been prepared
To suffer for your sake,
But you forced me so to bolt from
Winds that made my head ache,
I viewed your buildings from other buildings
And never saw your lake.

Arizona



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Impressions - Arizona

Shirley Jones '86

For our friends in Phoenix who lured us there

But what a country it is! And how incongruous it sounded to hear that locally overworked term “pretty” constantly used to describe the scenery. An English village can be pretty, Welsh border-country or the Scottish Lowlands. But to describe that dramatic terrain with such a pussy-cat adjective seems to me an outrage to those huge cactus shapes that loom in the evening against indigo skies. Quite numinous are those strange lunar landscapes mysteriously aflame, here and there, with clusters of desert flowers.

And then the sublime Grand Canyon! We saw it the only way possible in the limited time available. But it was not the best way.

In theory we were to fly up in a small aircraft, dipping excitingly down to the very rim. In economic practice, of course, it had to be a shared experience. Along with a coach-load of tourists down from Vegas, we were subjected to a badinage of local colour about bears and scorpions and rattle-snakes, by our driver - an irrepressible comedian with a captive audience! At various points of interest that all began to look remarkably alike, we were tipped out, shivering, to take our pictures and hold our collective breath at the scenery - or the keen wind. And no, I hadn't expected it to be raining or even cold, and it was both.

I suspect even the grandeur of one of the greatest natural wonders of the world can be diminished by the understandably inane comments of a motley bunch of tourists. How can one make a remark that is remotely appropriate to all that majesty. And so few of us can stay silent.

One day I must see the sun set on those amazing cliffs of amber. And I must see so much more. Arizona, I'll be back.

Austin



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Impressions - Austin

Shirley Jont '82

Austin reminded me of my first youthful impression of University College, Cardiff, though the whole of Cardiff's tiny complex could have nestled in a corner of the vast campus that is the University of Texas at Austin.

I went as a student to Cardiff after eighteen years' inurement to that fabled Rhondda Grey. Whatever the reputation won for it by Richard Llewellyn, my valley was never, in my time, very green! But suddenly in Cathays Park, Cardiff's seat of learning, somebody had invented Technicolor. White wedding cake buildings rose to a Madonna Blue sky and magnolias bloomed in green pastures.

And now, having seen so much of the United States in that spring of '83 from under umbrellas or through rain-splashed windows, I saw Austin washed clean and paint-box fresh, its fine buildings as vestal white as those Cardiff buildings of my youth.

Nor did the bright memory die there. For the following day, just as my breath had once been taken away by the size of Cardiff's rather modest collection of books, so now I gasped at that Aladdin's cave of literary treasures housed by the University's Humanities Research Center. Cardiff's coal profits may have borne some fair fruit but the Texas oil that was the well-spring of that amazing collection was surely blessed.

It wasn't that I hadn't already been treated to many rare viewings, on that trip, by collectors and curators generous with their time and free with their precious books. It was the sheer magnitude and range of the collection I was so liberally shown at Austin that was so overwhelming: everything from handwritten manuscripts of books that are legend to exquisitely bound works by artists of genius.

What a feast was there for this lifelong bibliophile.

Los Angeles



For Muir and Agnes Dawson

Los Angeles I must admit
Was no dream that will never fade,
Though the legends that surround it
Are the stuff of which dreams are made.

I suppose I didn't really care
For its wealthy suburban sprawl.
Yet the people that I met there
Were the kindest ones of all.

San Francisco



I think that I loved San Francisco best.
Old houses that have stood the test
Of time and changing fashion
With high-rise condominiums rest
As easily as Orient meets the West
In glittering Chinatown.

In Fisherman's Wharf, seals honk, gulls soar
Or swoop for scraps while calling for more -
Practised professionals all.
For they've seen tourists come and go
And been through this routine before
While touting for their haul.

Ferns in Muir Woods girdle redwood and pine;
Lichen soften the contours of a vine.
Last night as Oaklands West passed by
I saw policewomen by the station sign,
Pistol and night-stick distorting the line
Of female hip and thigh.

Exotic birds in Polk Street preen and prance
Aiming in their sexual ambivalence
To confuse those passing by.
On Union Square, a blackman in a trance
Of misery a heroin needle won't lance
Just waits to die.

I'm told when suicides leap from Golden Gate
They choose the Bay side for a last sight
Of the city before they go.
It's a gesture I appreciate -
To turn their back on a life they hate,
But not on San Francisco.

Where's
the
Guggenheim?



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Impressions - Cab Drivers

Shirley Jones '86

Cab Drivers

In New York, a cab driver of Italian extraction, a family man concerned for his daughters amid the violence of our times, poured out his unease to me about crime figures, the disappearance of the old values, the loss of respect for basic decency. And lost his way. Anxious about leaving a nice lady like me in Harlem, he offered to wait, and was unreassured that I didn't plan to wander beyond the Museum of the American Indian. Nevertheless I adamantly refused his offer. The drive out had drained my energy as well as my purse.

A Californian cab driver entertained me with stories about Jack London. He too was writing a book. "Been writing it for a long time now!" His drive also took a long time though I must admit it didn't seem to.

In Washington, my endearing fat black driver and I fell demonstrably into that category of two people separated by a common language. Confused by my Welsh accent he decided I was from Dallas and kept pointing out to me places of interest where famous people had been shot. He finally set me down at the wrong building in the wrong street, with a bag full of books, and avenues that stretched like prairies around me.

An Irish cab driver in Chicago breathed apocalyptic warnings about what would happen if Washington were elected mayor, and a black driver breathed equally apocalyptic warnings about what would happen if he weren't. Both were more *au fait* with their politics than with their routes, but at least not bereft of a sense of direction. My Polish cab driver couldn't tell north from south. Clutching my street map after I had directed him to North State Street, I knew that unless Lake Michigan had got up and crossed the road overnight, we were bound to be heading south. But my driver hadn't observed such a sophisticated geographical detail, and banging his head on his wheel in penance may have made me concerned for his head but it didn't make me early for my appointment.

That London taxi driver who actually didn't know where Bleeding Heart Yard was - come back, all is forgiven.

